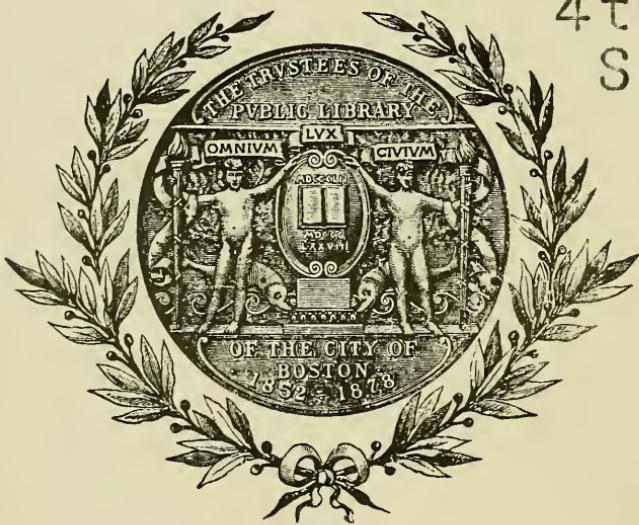


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THE

SERVICE OF PRAYER

IN THE

WORK OF THE WORLD.

BY

REV. AUGUSTUS M. LORD.



AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,

BOSTON.

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“The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity ; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.” — ARTICLE I. of the *By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

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THE SERVICE OF PRAYER IN THE WORK OF THE WORLD.

That they should seek God, if haply they might feel after him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.— ACTS xvii. 27.

JAMES DARMESTETER, in his noble essay on the Prophets of Israel, with great force of argument and brilliancy of illustration, urges the claim that an age or a nation is strong and influential and rich in resources in proportion as it possesses, for its leaders and governors, men who have the prophetic gift, the power to gather together into a single unit the various tendencies, impulses, aims, opportunities of their time and their particular calling, and see whither the pressure of all of them taken together is moving the community, and then to throw all the weight of their influence either to warn and to check, or to enforce and to hasten that movement.

What we need to-day, he believes, is more men, more leaders of just that type,— men of the wide prophetic consciousness, and the keen, incorruptible, prophetic conscience.

Side by side with this claim I am sure we must urge another which affects directly the life of the humblest follower as well as of the greatest leader: the claim that the world still needs—needs more than ever, as its power is greater and its opportunity larger—another gift, another quality, another steadily developed and purified and en-

nobled trait of the Hebrew people,—the spirit of prayer, which moved unerringly upward, freeing itself from bondage to one superstition after another, getting ever closer and closer to the practical life of the people, step by step in line with the spirit of prophecy. Indeed, progress in the one is impossible without progress in the other. The prophet gets his resistless impulse out of the silent depths of aspiration and faith in the multitude of lives to which he prophesies; to use a favorite simile of Gladstone's, "Like some great cliff facing oceanward, he only gives them back in spray what they give him in wave."

It is this claim which I wish to make good, and the practical applications of this claim which I wish to make clear, immediate, pressing, in what I have to say this morning.

You will understand I am not speaking of prayer at its lowest,—the use of a particular form of words as a charm to conjure with, the cry of grovelling fear, the perfunctory homage of the unprofitable servant; all these, to be sure, are in the past, and they are in the present, too. More shame to us!

I am speaking of prayer, however, at its best and highest, the conscious concentration of a man's thought, feeling, and will, as they awake to the presence of the friendship of God; the concentration upon each human life of the thought and feeling and will of the conscious life at the heart of the world, without whose deliberate intention and guidance all progress, all civilization, would be impossible.

Be patient with me! I know to whom I am speaking. I am speaking to a generation of men and women most of whom, the wide world over, think they do not pray, and cannot pray, in any real and satisfying sense. Some of you have given over the thought of prayer willingly. You think you are impregnable in your position that the

need of prayer was a weakness of childhood and youth, which has no place in your strong, self-reliant manhood and womanhood. You think you can prove that prayer will be unreasonable and unnecessary when all men shall become as strong and fully developed as you are,— a consummation, it seems, that will surely come in the fulness of time. But think! May it not be that prayer has no place in your life because your life does not cover enough ground to include the domain of prayer; has not claimed or entered into the inheritance of all the rich and wonderful experiences which are meant for the possession and use of a human life; has not pushed out into the deep, and known the whole peril and mastery, the beckonings and invitations, the still broadening and inspiring mysteries, that lie out there beyond the land-locked bay of your content? May it not be? It is that possibility which I shall try to force through, to make a probability, still further even a conviction, God helping me, against the parry and guard of your practised thought. And although I should fail, you will respect my motive, as I respect yours.

Again, there are those of you who have given over the thought of prayer not willingly, but wistfully.

“It was a childish ignorance, but now ‘t is little joy
To think I’m farther off from heaven than when I was a boy.”

Nothing can take the place for you of that old affectionate confidence, that closer walk with a God in whom now you strive vainly to believe. Nothing can dim that memory or make it less dear to you,— not the demonstrations of material science about the grandeur of the universe in general; not the abstract reasonings of ethics and sociology about the dignity and duty of man in particular. The old illusion will still be dearer to your heart, even while what you deem the new reality is clearer to

your thought. To such as these among you I shall try to show, what I believe with all my soul, that while the old childish view must perhaps be abandoned, yet it is not to be abandoned merely that its place may be filled by anything that a material science or an abstract philosophy, unaided, can supply. These bring us insights into new realities, undoubtedly, but not into the whole of reality that is waiting for our discovery and recognition. The old conception of prayer is to be abandoned only that it may give place to a sense of communion with God more intimate still, more close and loving, more noble and inspiring, than could be possible for the child. The letter of the child's faith shall be destroyed, only that its spirit may be fulfilled. It shall be a progress and enrichment, not a narrowing and a loss. Just as it is in the communion between one human life and another.

The child loves the father and the mother, and comes to them with its trials and its troubles, its ambitions and disappointments. The love is real, and has in it the root of holiness and nobility, not the flower and the fruit. For in the love of the best child there must be mingled something of wilfulness and selfishness and short-sightedness,—a looking toward the gifts and comforts that love affords, rather than toward love itself. But by and by the parent and the child walk together as friends, and the child knows that the communion of love between life and life is the main thing, the great, the all-important reality, the inalienable possession of the human soul; and the outward gift is only the passing, and not even the whole expression of that reality. More than that, he comes to recognize that the silences and refusals of love sometimes speak a nobler message, give a deeper and at the last a more satisfactory answer, dower us with a more precious gift, than do its yieldings and concessions and demonstrative declarations.

If there be here to-day any lonely, wistful, backward-looking souls, who have lost out of manhood or womanhood the sense of a presence which gave beauty to childhood and enthusiasm to youth, God help me to show them that it is only because they have not yet searched through the heart of their manhood and womanhood ; they have not yet comprehended their inner life. For that presence of the living God does not draw farther away from us ; it journeys inward year by year.

Let us begin, then, with the rudiments, the first principles, below all possibility of dispute between reasonable and thoughtful men. There are two elements in every man's thought,—the sense of his own life, of himself as a distinct being, and his sense of the eternal source and principle of life of which he is the particular result. You may think of this last element either as unknown and unknowable, or you may think of it as a conscious personal spirit whom we love because he first loved us, or you may think of it in any of the various possible terms and images that lie between these two extremes ; but you must think of it in some form or other if you force your thought home ; if you are to claim fellowship with those whose thought is conclusive and authoritative in the modern world, whether scientists or philosophers, men of letters or men of action. And one quality in this environing presence which none of us, from whatever point of view we approach it, can help acknowledging, is the quality of life. God is the great eternal heart of life, in relation to which alone our own personal life can take on color, significance, duty, power,—does take on all the more meaning, symmetry, force, distinctness, as our relation to that life of life becomes more clearly conscious, more orderly, more direct and constant and close.

Now just here we come face to face with the essential fact of prayer. The spirit of prayer is wakened by just

this touch between life and life, the sense of rest and repose, of unburdening and relief, of uplift and power and joy, which comes whenever, by accident or by intention, the lesser, more confined and limited life enters into open communion with the larger, exhaustless life. This is a joy and a power clearly distinct from that which comes from the contact of your life with some machine, some system of supposed material law, which does your work but does not respond to you in kind, does not give you the sense of satisfying companionship.

My conviction is that the need and satisfaction of prayer touches life through and through, from the bottom to the top and from the centre to the circumference. There is a life of the senses ; well, then, there is a prayer of the senses, too. He who has ever gone out to seek his little definite work, or his little definite pleasure, on some perfect day when the sky is clear and the air had in it the tonic quality caught up from the seas or the wooded hills, and has found his whole body thrilled and exhilarated with an unexpected sense of health, buoyancy, strength, flowing in upon it from the great sources of physical life of which his bodily vigor is only a single expression ; he who, in his absorption in that great glow of life that kindled upon him, has for the moment forgotten, lost sight of the definite work or the definite pleasure, and just lived for the sake of living ; he who, when at last he turned again and fulfilled his purpose and his duty, has found that he carried into his actions, his words, his work, an ease of accomplishment, a resistless energy which could never come from all his lonely planning and willing, — he knows what I mean. In the old pagan days, even in the earlier days of Christianity, when a man out of some such noble physical confidence said, “ I never felt so well, so sure, so strong, so glad as I do now,” men hushed him up, saying he was awakening the jealousy of God, he

was tempting Providence. But to-day we deliberately put ourselves in the way of these communions with the saving health at the heart of Nature.

Shall there then be these refreshments of the physical instrument of the spirit's life out of the great system, the great life of the physical world, and shall there be no mightier, fuller, deeper consciousness behind and around our conscious life, our will, our thought, our purposes, our affections? And if there is such a spiritual background, such an all-enfolding presence, shall there be no conscious relationship between my spirit and that spirit? If there be, then this communion of the spirit of man with the spirit of God, the abiding consciousness that guides the successive generations of men, holding the fruits of one generation for the inheritance of the next,—this communion of life with life shall be prayer.

Look the reasonableness of the situation, look the facts in the face, and there can be no "if" about what is waiting for us here. The only question is whether we will rouse ourselves to search into it and understand it; whether prayer shall be for us as an occasional gleam, a flash of passing insight, or as a steadily shining light held in a firm hand. Doubtless we must all begin with the one, and we shall not reach the other in a single moment, in a single step, by a single act of the will; nor should we be disheartened because it is so.

Let me tell you what I think is the way by which we may come to the fuller communion with God which we all need. First, I should say that we should learn not to avoid that communion, not to shrink from these moments alone in the presence of the Most High that inhabiteth Eternity, not to hurry away from them, trying to busy ourselves with little interests whenever we find that such solemn, thrilling, sobering moments are close upon us. I know many of us do that. We do not like to think seri-

ously, to feel deeply; we do not like the sense of being beyond our depth; and therefore we try to escape when the tides of the spirit sweep in on us. Whereas what we ought to do is to recognize that the depths are there, and to develop the strength and skill that should make it a joy to feel them under us.

Again, as we should not shrink from receiving impressions from the spiritual world about us, so also we should not shrink from pouring out, through the silent expressions, petitions, thanksgivings of our hearts, put into coherent thoughts and if need be uttered words,—for thought without words is to most of us vague and dim,—we should not shrink from thus pouring out as before a loving, living, listening God, the tumult and stress of our own life when its inner deeps are broken up. The life of God is waiting for us, and we need not fear this abandonment of soul, this letting of ourselves go. You may think it is only into the dark, but try it; let your hopes or your doubts have way; do not try to live them down or to reason them down piece by piece! It is only so that sanity and strength and peace of soul come back. And that they do come back in greater measure is the proof that in their venture they touch an answering life and not a senseless void.

And then I believe we may learn to come to the larger life of God not only when we feel the drawing, the attraction of it in the way of impression from without or impulse from within,—we shall learn further the wisdom of coming to it regularly with the little daily life of our souls; we shall learn to set aside certain moments, certain days, when we shall gather the results of our effort together and sum them up as in the presence of one in whose justice and love there is no variableness or turning shadow. A man cannot go out from those moments of silent communion with God, if he is truly sincere with

himself, just the same as he entered into them. When he looks at his life there in the quiet, away from the excitement of competition and contest, away from all foolish noise, often he shall find that he has cheated himself; he has done little where he might have done much. He finds his fingers closing about a handful of dust, when he might have held a victor's sword or the sceptre of a noble leadership. Is this all he has done with the opportunities of his life! To-morrow he will begin to live out of a higher impulse and a clearer wisdom! So God's voice reaches him in the silence which he has made ready for God.

And finally, at the very last we shall learn that prayer which is the crown of all; it shall be more than a coming to God, more than a testing of our soul in his presence: it shall be a walking with him, a yielding of our soul to his service, a carrying of his spirit with us into our daily life, knowing it as the conscious background of our words and deeds. And how much mightier and more commanding than the word or the deed which has behind it only our personal conceit, our selfish interests, our careless good nature, is the word which we speak as a message, the deed which we do at the resistless bidding of a love and loyalty for the sake of which, if need be, we lay down our life. It is not that we live and die that is significant; it is for what we long to live, or for what we are willing to die!

I know I am speaking of the heights of great attainments which few, if any, of us have ever reached. But unless we lift our eyes to those heights, we shall never win and hold a single step toward them; and the lifting of the eyes, the pledging of the will, that is the way of prayer.

Oh, let us set our feet in that path, for it opens close upon every life; and let us begin just where it opens, just where it is part of our genuine experience, although at

first we must begin doubtfully, and seemingly far away from the full harmony —

“ When mind and soul according well
Shall make one music as before.”

Paul is not afraid to speak of prayer in words that would not be in tune with the dogmatic sentences of the creeds, “ If perhaps they might feel after God.”

It is the glory of religion at its best, it is the glory of a free church, that it will not permit, it does not tempt us to think that we have fulfilled the whole function of prayer when we have repeated a few sentences, read a few words. It is the glory of a free church that it permits us to begin our learning to pray no higher than the point of our farthest knowledge, our purest affection, our best attainment. More than that, it constrains and commands us to begin at that highest point in our own soul, our own life,—no lower and no higher; there, and nowhere else. Must we begin with an altar to an unknown God? Well and good! That may be the beginning; it shall not be the end. “ Now we see in a glass darkly, then face to face. Now I know in part, then shall I know even as also I am known!” And it shall be prayer, in its deep, true sense,—prayer, and the thoughts and desires and resolves which follow after prayer, that shall lift our life day by day, year by year, from strength to strength, and from glory to glory.

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